

**Power to  
Change**

Backing  
community  
business

# The new high street playbook



## Community-led innovation in action

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# About Power to Change

**Power to Change is the think-do tank that backs community business.**

We back community business from the ground up. We turn bold ideas into action so communities have the power to change what matters to them. We know community business works to build stronger communities and better places to live. We've seen people create resilient and prosperous local economies when power is in community hands. We also know the barriers that stand in the way of their success.

We're using our experience to bring partners together to do, test and learn what works. We're shaping the conditions for community business to thrive.

This work is part of Power to Change's community-powered places and spaces workstream.

## Our strategic priorities

**Power to  
Change**



### **Creating community-powered places and spaces**

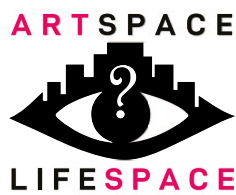
The places and spaces which enable communities to come together are disappearing.

- **Community business brings people closer together** and gives communities a real say in how their neighbourhoods, high streets and shared assets are run.
- **We will work alongside community businesses and other partners,** to help grow what works to revive our local spaces and reconnect our communities.

# Acknowledgements

Power to Change would like to thank the members of the High Streets Policy Reference Group for their participation and contributions to the Community-Led High Streets Innovator demonstrator and their feedback on this report.

The Community-Led High Street Innovators demonstrator has been made possible by the following five community businesses which have partnered with us as Innovators over the last year. We would like to thank them sincerely for partnering with us as we have transitioned into our role as a think-do tank, for generously sharing their learning and insight, and for their valuable feedback on this report, helping to ground our findings and recommendations in the realities of community business working to revitalise their high streets and town centres.



# Executive summary



*Star and Shadow Cinema, Newcastle upon Tyne*

**Britain's high streets are under pressure, but the challenge is not simply retail decline. High streets are civic systems: what happens on them is shaped by ownership, governance, finance, data and local capacity. Government policy is now beginning to reflect that reality.**

The forthcoming High Street Strategy and its £301 million funding for High Street Innovation Partnerships signal a shift away from a narrow retail-recovery model and towards a mixed-use future for high streets that includes homes, health services, libraries, community hubs and

green space. The task now is to match that emerging vision with the tools, powers and investment needed to make it a reality.

This report argues that the right organising principle for that shift is the **civic high street**. This is not a nostalgic attempt to restore a retail model. It is a practical case for rebuilding the social infrastructure that helps neighbourhoods function: places for care, learning, enterprise, culture, connection and everyday participation. Our findings show that local high streets are closely tied to social cohesion and civic participation, and often host the everyday amenities that support healthier, more

connected lives. In disadvantaged areas, that social infrastructure is often weakest, even though residents may rely on it most. Seen this way, high streets are not only sites of regeneration, they are places where wider national goals – including neighbourhood health, social cohesion, skills and civic trust – can be made visible and local.

Community-led regeneration should sit at the heart of this agenda. Through Power to Change's Community-Led High Street Innovators (CLHSI) demonstrator, five community businesses have shown that communities can unlock different kinds of renewal on the high street. They do more than fill empty units. They organise local demand, steward assets, build legitimacy, convene across sectors and sustain activity over time. Across Bristol, Birkenhead, Dewsbury and Stockport, the demonstrator shows that community businesses are often best placed to turn the idea of the civic high street into something practical: a model of renewal that is more locally rooted, more trusted and more durable than top-down regeneration alone. That is why they should be treated not only as delivery partners, but as co-designers of local renewal.

But the central lesson of the demonstrator is systemic. Community-led regeneration does not lack ambition, ideas or energy, but it can stall because the wider system makes local stewardship too hard to sustain. Across the demonstrator, the same structural barriers kept recurring: fragmented ownership, poor access to vacancy and ownership data, weak routes from meanwhile use to longer-term control, thin council capacity, and funding that is short-term, fragmented or poorly matched to the work of regeneration. The result is that community organisations are often left doing system work themselves – assembling intelligence, brokering relationships, carrying development risk and stitching together patchwork funding simply to keep viable local ideas alive.

The task for policymakers, then, is more than simply funding more pilots or encouraging more temporary activation of vacant units; they must remove blockers, rewire incentives and back long-term stewardship. That means treating better property data as enabling infrastructure; designing neighbourhood governance so communities can shape live decisions rather than simply attend meetings; helping councils use the powers they already have; making meanwhile use a route to stability rather than a revolving door; and aligning revenue, development support, capital and patient finance around a pathway from activation to stewardship. It also means recognising that some of the infrastructure needed for civic renewal is still missing – including agile mechanisms that can help communities secure assets at the pace required by the market.



## This report therefore makes six recommendations for central government to catalyse community-led high street renewal:

1

**Make a civic high street model the explicit vision of the High Street Strategy**, replacing narrow retail recovery with a strategy to deliver a mixed-use model of homes, health, culture, learning, enterprise and community space.

2

**Reform access to and collection of high street data**, to give councils and communities access to the ownership, vacancy and property data they need to act strategically.

3

**Roll out support to help councils utilise their powers in practice**, ensuring they can shape the high street with local communities.

4

**Facilitate community stewardship of the high street** by designing funding and support to help communities move from temporary use to long-term stewardship and ownership.

5

**Support effective meanwhile use** through a fairer model lease and support for landlords and tenants, so meanwhile space becomes a genuine incubator for community enterprise, not a revolving door.

6

**Create a route to asset acquisition** by establishing a Property Holding Vehicle to provide flexible capital at pace for community-led buyouts of high street property.

Together, these recommendations would help shift national policy away from seeing community use as a temporary fix for vacancy and towards building the conditions for long-term civic stewardship of the high street.

# Background



Sparks, Bristol

The UK's high streets and town centres are under pressure, but the challenge goes beyond declining retail. In many places the deeper problem is that high streets have become hard to govern in the public interest: ownership is fragmented, data is partial, public capacity is thin, and decisions about space are often remote from the people who live and work there. Power to Change's work on community-led regeneration starts from a different premise: communities can and do renew high streets when they can access space, shape decisions and steward assets over time.

The CLHSI demonstrator was designed to test that proposition in practice. Working with a small cohort of five community businesses in England (our Innovators), it explores what community-led high street regeneration looks like on the ground and what repeatedly helps or blocks it. The emphasis is less on producing a single blueprint and more on surfacing practical lessons about space, governance, finance and stewardship.

This learning lands at an important moment. The government has announced plans for a new High Street Strategy, with £301 million of funding to support local innovation partnerships to drive high street renewal.<sup>1</sup>

This work also sits in the context of the government's Pride in Place programme – intended to restore local control and repair institutional trust, by putting control of local renewal in community hands. This creates an immediate opportunity to move beyond a narrow retail-recovery frame and towards a civic model of the high street that includes culture, health, enterprise, housing and community infrastructure.

### Our demonstrator has highlighted:

- Community-led organisations can activate high streets in ways that are more locally legitimate, inclusive and durable than top-down regeneration alone.
- But they keep encountering the same structural barriers: poor ownership and vacancy data, insecure access to space, distant decision-making, low local authority capacity and fragmented funding.
- Meanwhile use can be valuable, but without a route to permanence it often reproduces instability rather than building stewardship.
- The strongest policy opportunities are to improve access to data, create a clearer pathway from activation to stewardship, back community influence in governance, and align capital and revenue funding around long-term local use.

This learning report shares lessons from the first phase of the CLHSI demonstrator and connects practice-based learning from the Innovators to the current policy window. It also reflects a growing emphasis in our high streets work on the conditions needed for longer-term stewardship: community influence, governance and, where possible, ownership pathways.



CLHSI study visit to Stockport

# Why invest in community-led regeneration of high streets and town centres?

The case for community-led regeneration is not only about reviving shops. It is about whether high streets can once again function as the everyday social infrastructure of neighbourhood life: the places where people meet, access services, build trust, find opportunity and feel that change is happening around them. Recent work on neighbourhood parades makes this explicit.<sup>2</sup> It shows that these local high streets are strongly associated with social cohesion and civic participation, and that they often host the kinds of amenities that support healthier, more connected lives, such as community spaces, cafés, childcare, health services, libraries, sports and leisure facilities.<sup>3</sup> Where that social infrastructure is weak, wider outcomes are weaker too. Local high streets in deprived areas have less social infrastructure, fewer informal social spaces, fewer health-promoting amenities and less childcare provision, while residents are often more reliant on them because of weaker transport options and lower car ownership. Previous work by the London School of Economics for Power to Change shows that community businesses act as 'destination places' that draw people back to the high street and help increase footfall.<sup>4</sup>



*CLHSI study visit to Dewsbury*

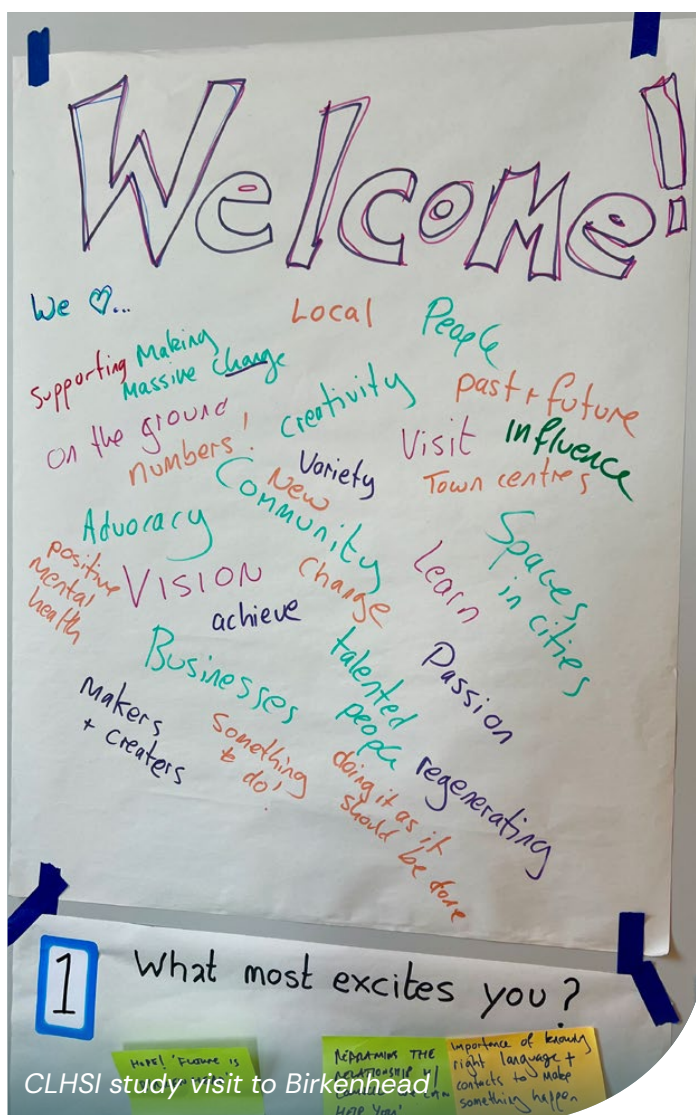
That is why the civic high street matters. A high street is not just a retail corridor; it is part of the social fabric that helps hold a place together. If it is dominated by vacancy, or a narrow and unhealthy mix of uses, the effects are wider than footfall. The result can be weaker social connection, lower local confidence, poorer health, fewer everyday opportunities to participate, and a deeper sense that decline is being lived rather than simply observed. The argument, then, is not for nostalgia or cosmetic improvement. It is for a model of renewal that treats high streets as places through which government and communities can respond to bigger public challenges, including social isolation, deteriorating health, exclusion from opportunity and the erosion of local civic life.

The CLHSI demonstrator reinforces this. Across the cohort, community businesses are not simply trying to fill empty units. They are building forms of social infrastructure suited to their places:

- **Artspace Lifespace<sup>5</sup>** showing how a large vacant store can become a civic and cultural anchor in Bristol
- **MadLab<sup>6</sup>** advocating for culture and community use as part of Stockport's long-term future
- **Make CIC<sup>7</sup>** using permanent space, cultural activity and coalition-building to strengthen local identity and participation in Birkenhead
- **Southmead Development Trust<sup>8</sup>** bringing housing, community and retail development forward to create a more viable, healthier high street
- **The Arcade Group<sup>9</sup>** using an historic asset, events and business networking to rebuild confidence in Dewsbury town centre.

In different ways, each points to the same lesson: communities are often best placed to create high streets that are more mixed-use, more locally legitimate and more socially useful than retail-led regeneration alone.

Community businesses are especially well placed to help build this civic model because they are rooted in place, trusted locally and able to connect economic activity with wider social purpose. They can convene across sectors, carry community knowledge into regeneration decisions, and keep working across the long timescales that real renewal requires. But the demonstrator also shows that this cannot rest on local ingenuity alone. If high streets are to help rebuild social infrastructure and address wider public challenges, policy needs to reduce structural barriers and back long-term stewardship rather than relying solely on short-term activation.



## Methodology and approach

Community-Led High Street Innovators was designed as a test-and-learn demonstrator to explore what enables community businesses to shape, revitalise and sustain high streets and town centres. The demonstrator combined revenue funding for five innovative community businesses with a structured learning model intended to generate insight for practice, policy and future programme design.

These community businesses were selected for their existing focus on revitalising their high street, and a clear proposal for how to develop and progress this work. A co-design process between Power to Change and each Innovator honed their focus and budget, and funding primarily supported the capacity of each community business to progress this work. A structured learning model combined quarterly study visits, regular learning touchpoints and a shared evidence-gathering framework.

A core feature of the demonstrator was the series of quarterly study visits, hosted by Innovators in their own places. These visits were designed to help the cohort understand each project in context, support peer exchange, and surface practical learning from work on the ground. In addition, a High Street Policy Reference Group met quarterly, twice alongside the Innovator cohort at the quarterly study visits. The reference group met to share relevant research and practice, test emerging ideas and help interpret learning from the demonstrators in relation to wider policy debates.

Taken together, these sources were reviewed thematically to identify recurring patterns across the five places. The analysis focused on what Innovators were able to do through their high street work, which barriers and enabling conditions appeared consistently across different contexts, and what these patterns imply for practice and policy.



*CLHSI study visit to Dewsbury*

# Spotlight on the community businesses

## About the five Innovators

**Artspace Lifespace in Bristol** is using the experience of activating Sparks and participating in the city's Vacant Property Taskforce (VPT) to examine how meanwhile use, vacancy, landlord behaviour and city-centre governance interact. Its learning is particularly valuable on what it takes to move from temporary activation to longer-term stewardship.



**MadLab in Stockport** is responding to rapid regeneration and the risk that creative and community uses are priced out as land values rise. Its work combines data gathering, coalition-building and experiments in governance to argue for a longer-term place for culture and community use in the town centre.

**Make CIC in Birkenhead** is testing both asset-based renewal and local governance. Alongside growing Make Hamilton as a permanent maker and community space, it has used CLHSI to explore the potential and limits of High Street Rental Auctions (HSRAs) and to build the Leftbank Collective as a community-led regeneration coalition.



**Southmead Development Trust in Bristol** is pursuing a different model: a community-led extension of the high street that brings together housing, public realm and community facilities. The project illustrates the potential of mixed-use, long-term stewardship, but also the technical and financial barriers community organisations face when leading complex development.

**The Arcade Group in Dewsbury** is preparing to run the UK's first community-led shopping arcade while also trying to influence wider town-centre renewal through events, business networking and engagement with local regeneration structures. Its experience shows both the promise and the limits of current neighbourhood governance.



The cohort was selected to explore different kinds of community-led high street practice: arts-led activation, data-led work on vacancy and ownership, experiments in local governance, mixed-use development and attempts to use new public powers.

Taken together, these projects show that the barriers facing community-led high street renewal are not isolated to individual places. Across the cohort, Innovators are working in different contexts and sectors, but they encounter many of the same structural challenges: difficulty accessing and securing space, limited influence over regeneration decisions, fragmented ownership, and funding models that do not support long-term stewardship. These shared pressures point to a wider system problem, not a shortage of local ambition or imagination.

Beyond the five community businesses we've learned alongside in this demonstrator sits a broad civic high streets movement working to bring this vision to life. A range of actors are testing models and approaches to regenerate our high streets in varied ways. For instance, Nudge Community Builders in Plymouth unlocking 25% of the empty space on their high street for community use,<sup>10</sup> while the local council and Barnsley Hospital NHS Foundation Trust are working in partnership to bring NHS services to their town centre,<sup>11</sup> and the Wandsworth Town Property Partnership are partnering with private property developer ARC LRE Ltd to build community space into a new development in south-west London.<sup>12</sup>

Sitting in support of these individual projects are a range of organisations exploring routes towards a civic high street model. We include Power to Change's existing work on Community Improvement Districts<sup>13</sup> here, alongside the Architectural Heritage Trust's Heritage Development Trust model<sup>14</sup> and Platform Places' Local Property Partnerships<sup>15</sup> project. International models are also being adopted by communities keen to build a new vision of the high street, such as the Creative Land Trust model, which is now operational in Margate<sup>16</sup> and London.<sup>17</sup>

This wave of community-led ambition for high streets is reinforced by the interest expressed in the CLHSI demonstrator. After inviting ideas from community businesses across England, Power to Change heard from over 140 organisations developing their work on the high street to support health, entrepreneurship, housing, culture and local infrastructure, with many proposals focused on gaining access to space and shaping local development.

It's clear that community businesses and aligned high street stakeholders are already reimagining high streets as mixed-use civic spaces rather than retail-only environments. What is missing is not ideas, but the enabling conditions to turn those ideas into lasting change: accessible space, usable powers, patient revenue support and meaningful routes into decision making.

This matters for policy because it points to a clear first principle for reform: if high streets are already evolving beyond a retail-only model, national strategy needs to reflect this reality.

The remainder of this report draws out what the Innovators' work reveals about the conditions needed to make this vision viable in practice. Across the cohort, three cross-cutting issues recurred most strongly: access to space, governance and decision making, and funding and finance.



*Nudge Community Builders, Plymouth*



## Innovator profile

# MadLab

MadLab describe themselves as a grassroots innovation organisation with a mission to grow Manchester's skills base and foster new forms of community and civic engagement.

**MadLab began working in The Northern Quarter in Manchester in 2009, establishing a makerspace in a rundown industrial building, before being forced out by an increase in rents – a victim of the gentrification they had played a part in kick-starting.**

In Stockport MadLab are working to underline the importance of community and cultural space in the long-term future of Stockport, challenging developer-led regeneration and seeking routes for the community in Stockport to benefit from the regeneration of their town.

Their work spans digital skills training, community innovation programmes, and place-based cultural infrastructure and regeneration. Through their programmes such as 'Shift Click', MadLab are supporting hundreds of young adults from underserved communities through industry-focussed digital skills training – coding, design and games development – in Stockport and across Greater Manchester.

Post-engagement with Madlab's programmes,

**94%**

of participants felt more empowered and

**88%**

had grown in confidence, with a significant number progressing into careers in the digital and creative industries – at the BBC, Co-op, Barclays, Autotrader, and others.



Dubbed 'the new Berlin' in 2023, Stockport has been successful in securing both public and private investment and is undergoing rapid change – from large-scale transport infrastructure projects to a reversal in vacancy rates on the high street, where ten years ago as many as 30% of the shops were empty. However, the borough also remains deeply polarised, with the widest deprivation gap between its neighbourhoods of any local authority in England.<sup>18</sup>

Through CLHSI MadLab are working in partnership with Grit Studios, a non-profit that creates spaces for artists, makers and creatives, and Manchester Metropolitan University. They are working to access and collate data about the use of space in Stockport to create a data-driven narrative for change, and are working to secure a new public HQ in the town centre.

They are also taking on the question of how Stockport can learn from the gentrification of central Manchester, where creatives were pushed out by rising land values. In alignment with the combined authority's Creative Industries Sector Development Plan, MadLab are exploring how the creative industries can continue to grow and develop in Stockport, focusing on access to space in the town centre. In the context of the global trend that has seen the loss of creative space in major cities worldwide and inspired by work by Left Bank Collective<sup>19</sup> in Sydney, Australia, MadLab are bringing together the creative and community sectors with the property sector to encourage new cross-sector partnerships and create pioneering new creative infrastructure in Stockport.

# Lessons from our Innovators

Across the cohort, three clusters of learning recur. First, communities struggle to access and secure space on fair terms. Second, governance structures often invite community participation without yielding real influence. Third, current funding and finance arrangements remain too short term, fragmented or misaligned to support long-term stewardship.

## Access to space

Access to space is not only a property problem, it is also a data and power problem. Across the cohort, poor information on ownership and lease conditions, and the difficulty in efficiently tracking vacancy on a local level, have made it harder for community organisations to target buildings, negotiate from an informed position or use public powers designed to tackle vacancy. Where the evidence base is weak, public power is much harder to use effectively.

Artspace Lifespace's work in Bristol and MadLab's work in Stockport both show how labour-intensive it is to build even a partial picture of a high street. Data sits across commercial platforms, council systems and local knowledge, often without common identifiers or easy routes for community access. That makes basic strategic questions – who owns what, what is vacant, what terms might be possible – unnecessarily difficult to answer.



CLHSI study visit to Stockport

## Building a property database the public sector does not have

In Bristol, Artspace Lifespace has been piecing together a working picture of vacancy, ownership and leasehold arrangements on Broadmead – not because this is naturally the role of a community arts organisation, but because the information needed to plan strategically is fragmented, incomplete and difficult to access. To do this, they have combined data from LandInsight, FindMyAddress and Google Maps, alongside intelligence from Bristol City Council and Bristol BID.

This is painstaking work. Even paid-for tools do not provide a complete picture, and because key council datasets do not align through standard identifiers such as Unique Property Reference Numbers (UPRNs), information has had to be manually matched across systems. Even after eight months, Artspace Lifespace estimated they had built only a partial view of the area. But that partial view is already useful: it helps them negotiate over space, advocate for vacant properties to be repurposed for civic use, and make a stronger case for community-led alternatives on the high street. Building on this work, Bristol City Council have agreed in principle to support the completion of the database and to hold this as a resource for others across the city to use the data for advocacy and negotiation.

**What this shows:** where property intelligence is weak, community businesses are stepping in to create the evidence infrastructure that regeneration should already be built on.

Make CIC's attempt to work with Wirral Council on High Street Rental Auctions (HSRAs), which we detail on the following page, reinforces this point. Legislation assumes that councils can assemble and maintain a usable vacancy register, yet in practice capacity, timing and internal coordination have made that difficult.

## Mapping what regeneration risks pushing out

In Stockport, MadLab and Manchester Metropolitan University are responding to rapid town centre change by building a different kind of map – one that tracks not only premises and vacancy, but also the cultural and community uses that give the place life. Using Experian Goad data, open-source mapping tools and local knowledge, they are building a shared digital map of arts, culture and community assets across the town centre.

What is innovative here is not just the tool, but the method. Rather than relying only on official datasets, the work invites local organisations and residents to add their own knowledge through participatory mapping, pop-up engagement and public surveys. This creates a richer picture of what is present, what is changing, and what may be at risk as rents rise and regeneration accelerates.

**What this shows:** community businesses are not only filling data gaps; they are redefining what counts as valuable evidence on the high street, using community knowledge to challenge narrower models of regeneration.

The implication is straightforward: better access to high street property data is the enabling infrastructure for community-led regeneration. Local authorities are best placed to assemble and maintain usable vacancy and ownership data, but central government can make that easier by standardising datasets, reducing avoidable barriers to sharing information, and designing future powers around the realities of local capacity.

While high street property data facilitates community businesses to work more strategically in their efforts to regenerate their high streets, it doesn't in itself enable community businesses to access and secure space on the high street.

This demonstrator has learnt alongside community businesses working to access and activate high street and town centre space in different ways, specifically through the use of meanwhile space and through the recently introduced local authority power, HSRAs. In Birkenhead, Make CIC have worked to bring new legislation to bear in their place, by exploring how community businesses can use this power to access high street and town centre space.



*Louise Cross, Make CIC*

## A brief history of High Street Rental Auctions

High Street Rental Auctions (HSRAs) are a new power introduced in December 2024 as part of the Levelling Up and Regeneration Act 2023.

They enable local authorities to require landlords to rent out commercial property on high streets and in town centres which have been persistently vacant – defined as vacant continuously for 12 months, or for 366 non-continuous days in the last 24 months.

The government's target for use of a HSRA is in areas of economic decline where there are high vacancy rates and where landlords are not actively working to let their property.

A small number of local authorities are working as 'early adopters' of the HSRA legislation, with support and funding from the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government (MHCLG). Through this demonstrator, Make CIC are the first community business to test how this new power can be brought to bear by the community.

## Using new legislation as a pressure point, not just a formal power

In Birkenhead, Make CIC set out to work with Wirral Council to test the new HRSA powers. Formal progress has been slow: council capacity is thin, internal coordination is difficult, and key early steps such as high street designation have yet to happen. But Make CIC has not simply waited for the system to catch up.

Instead, they have treated HSRA as a tool for organising and influence. They have researched the process, convened a public webinar for councillors and officers, connected Wirral to early-adopter councils, and used the new power to frame a broader local conversation about vacancy, ownership and what active intervention on the high street should look like. They are also turning this learning into a practical resource for other community organisations interested in accessing space.

**What this shows:** even where communities cannot directly wield formal powers, they can still use those powers strategically – as leverage, as a convening device, and as a way to push local systems towards action.

High Street Rental Auctions are promising in principle, but Make CIC's experience in Birkenhead suggests that they are difficult to operationalise where councils lack spare capacity, cross-team coordination or appetite for procedural risk. Early adopter learning suggests the real value of the power may lie as much in prompting earlier engagement with landlords and creating a vacancy strategy as in getting to auction itself.

When community businesses do gain access to space, the CLHSI demonstrator shows how meanwhile use can be an effective route into the high street; however, both its limits and benefits are apparent. With two contrasting experiences of the use of meanwhile tenure, Make CIC have successfully transitioned from accessing space on a meanwhile basis to securing a permanent and community-owned building on their local high street. Their journey from temporary use to permanent ownership in Birkenhead is remarkable precisely because it depended on unusually supportive local relationships and a route to capital.

Artspace Lifespace's experience of activating meanwhile space in Bristol, and struggling to convert this success to longer-term tenure, demonstrates a more common pattern where community organisations prove demand, animate a strategic site and shoulder practical risks, yet still struggle to secure meaningful conversations about longer-term tenure.



## Using meanwhile space as proof of concept — then converting it into ownership

Make CIC offers one of the clearest examples in the demonstrator of community businesses moving from temporary use to long-term control. In Birkenhead, they took on a meanwhile lease in a former council building on favourable terms, using peppercorn rent and business rates relief to test demand for creative and maker space. That temporary arrangement became proof of concept: it showed delivery capability, demonstrated social value, and made visible a strong local creative community.

Crucially, Make CIC then used that credibility to secure a longer-term outcome. Through relationships with Wirral Council, strategic influence via the Town Deal Board, and a clear case for community-led regeneration, they secured £1 million in Town Deal funding and acquired a permanent building: Make Hamilton. What began as temporary activation became long-term stewardship.

**What this shows:** meanwhile use is most powerful when it is treated not as an end in itself, but as a stepping stone towards permanence, backed by strategy, evidence and strong local relationships.



## Struggling to convert meanwhile success into meaningful conversations about high street space for the long-term

Artspace Lifespace's experience in Bristol provides a useful view of common challenges community businesses face in converting success on meanwhile terms into an opportunity to take on long-term space on the high street. Working in partnership with Global Goals Centre, Artspace Lifespace have welcomed 1.3 million visitors to Sparks, their meanwhile activation of the vacant Marks & Spencer department store on Broadmead, in the city's central shopping district.

The project is universally celebrated in the city. However, Artspace Lifespace's hopes of having meaningful conversations about long-term use with Bristol City Council as the building's freeholder, and the private company that holds an 80-year lease on the space, have not been realised. It is known that the building is for sale, but there has been no opportunity for Artspace Lifespace to explore the future of Sparks in this space with the asset owners.

This example also illustrates the unfavourable conditions on which community businesses can be offered meanwhile space. With a one-year term, Artspace Lifespace's lease passes on responsibility for maintaining and repairing the building. An unexpected repair needed for the lift has left the building's upper floors less accessible, and Artspace Lifespace's short lease leaves them unable to raise funding for the repair. With no certainty about the future of the building they and their partners are also unable to prioritise this significant outlay of funds.

**What this shows:** meanwhile use can become an impediment for community businesses attempting to reanimate high streets where this use of space is not approached as a partnership between community businesses and their landlords.



These examples show that community businesses are often doing far more than occupying vacant units. They are generating intelligence, brokering relationships, testing underused powers and creating routes from temporary use to longer-term stewardship. But they are doing so in spite of the current system, not because it is designed to support them.

Our demonstrator shows the need for a clearer community stewardship pathway: from pop-up or meanwhile use, to medium-term socially useful lease arrangements, to long-term stewardship or ownership where appropriate. The question is not whether every project should own buildings, but whether community use is ever allowed to stabilise.

## The community-led regeneration pathway





## Innovator profile

# Make CIC

Make CIC was established in 2012 to create community-led creative and maker spaces, first developing space in Liverpool's Baltic Triangle.

**Make CIC run four community makerspaces and creative hubs across Liverpool City Region. They create affordable space for people to make things as non-professionals, creative entrepreneurs to start and grow businesses, and the community to meet and organise, anchored in the belief that creativity, collaboration and local pride are powerful forces for change.**

They began working in Birkenhead in 2019, when the opportunity arose to take on meanwhile space, and in 2023 purchased a building in the town centre. Make Hamilton has created a permanent base for creativity and community in the heart of the Wirral, and enabled Make CIC to meet a decade-long goal.

Argyle Street and Birkenhead's wider town centre have suffered from significant economic decline and are characterised by vacant spaces and derelict sites, with few accessible community spaces. With Liverpool just over the water, there has been a sense that creative and innovative things happen elsewhere. Despite these challenges Argyle Street is becoming a hub of community-powered regeneration with Make Hamilton joining Future Yard, a community-led music venue, as well as a coalition of local organisations working to lead regeneration efforts alongside local residents and businesses.



*Make CIC, Birkenhead*

The regeneration of Birkenhead has been a regional focus for the past decade or so, with Town Deal funding from the previous government focusing on the town's infrastructure, and funding the purchase of Make Hamilton. Recently the town has been confirmed for Pride in Place funding.

Through CLHSI Make CIC are focusing on two projects that contribute to high street renewal: the first is developing the Leftbank Collective, a coalition of local organisations working to coordinate community-led regeneration of the high street; the second is working in collaboration with Wirral Council to test new HSRA legislation to access space for community use on the high street.



Across their four centres, Make CIC supported

**629**

creatives in 2024/25 through affordable studio spaces and funded workshops.

With a turnover in excess of

**£0.8m**

the team hosted

**462**

people across **35 workshops and classes** delivered throughout the year.

Their incubation of local creative entrepreneurs delivered in excess of

**£58,000**

of commissioned work to their tenants.

Their reach spans the entire community, with participants ranging from as young as five, up to 80 years old.

## Governance

The governance challenge for community-led high street renewal is not simply whether communities are invited into the room. It is whether the room has any power, whether community organisations can influence live decisions, and whether councils have the capacity and continuity to work as genuine partners.

### Building a long-term community mandate for change

In Southmead, in north Bristol, governance has not started with a board or a funding programme. It has started with a long-term community mandate. Southmead Development Trust (SDT) began by working with residents to understand local priorities for their neighbourhood, surveying more than 900 households and creating a community-led plan that shaped a wider regeneration masterplan for the area. That process led to a resident-led steering group, a clear set of local priorities, and a development vision linking homes, community space and a healthier high street.

What is striking here is the continuity. Over more than a decade, SDT has helped carry community priorities through consultation, planning, redesign and partnership-building, even as conditions have changed. That includes adapting plans in response to Covid-19, cost pressures and ongoing local feedback, while keeping residents involved in decisions about designs for the development and their priorities for their place.

This is governance in a deeper sense than formal representation alone. SDT is not simply delivering a project; it is holding a relationship between community voice, long-term place-shaping and institutional partners. That gives it locally built legitimacy that has been sustained over time; something many formal regeneration structures lack.

**What this shows:** community businesses can provide continuity, accountability and local mandate across long development timelines – something short-term public programmes and rotating governance boards often struggle to do.



While SDT have benefitted from ongoing support from their local council, across the cohort relationships with local authorities were highly contingent. Where officers understood the value of community businesses, progress was possible. But where capacity was thin, teams changed, or decision-making became more internalised, partnership stalled. The experiences of Make CIC in Wirral and MadLab in Stockport show how quickly momentum can be lost when councils cannot sustain cross-team working or honour earlier collaborative commitments.

### Rewiring the room when formal partnership breaks down

In Stockport, MadLab's experience shows what happens when a community organisation helps secure major investment, only to find itself edged out as local authority teams change and decisions become internalised. After helping lead a successful bid to the Cultural Development Fund, MadLab expected to remain a meaningful partner in shaping the creative infrastructure that funding was meant to support. Instead, decisions about building design, use and operation became more closed, and the original collaborative ambition weakened.

MadLab's response has not been to retreat. Instead, it has started building a new governance conversation through Culture in Place, a project designed to bring together actors who do not usually sit around the same table: creative organisations, developers, property agents, the Mayoral Development Corporation, local and combined authority culture teams, and others with influence over space. The aim is to shift the debate from short-term occupation towards longer-term creative infrastructure and new models such as land trusts, non-profit brokerage and cross-subsidised rent.

This is an important form of community leadership. MadLab is not waiting to be invited back into a closed process; it is creating a new forum in which the terms of regeneration can be contested and reshaped.

**What this shows:** when formal partnership becomes complex or fragile, community businesses can act entrepreneurially to create new governance spaces and bring missing actors into the conversation.

This is not an argument against local authorities. It is an argument for treating council capacity as a live condition of delivery rather than a background assumption. Community-led regeneration often depends on a small number of officers doing brokerage work on top of already stretched roles.

The CLHSI cohort also raises questions about whether current neighbourhood governance is transferring meaningful influence and the conditions that can make this achievable. The cohort demonstrates the varied experience of community businesses in Pride in Place areas across England. In Dewsbury, the Arcade Group has secured representation on the Neighbourhood Board, while in Birkenhead the Chief Executive of Make CIC has recently been announced as the independent chair of the Birkenhead Central Neighbourhood Board.

Dewsbury's experience suggests that structures associated with Pride in Place and its predecessor programmes can still feel council-led, even where community representatives are present. Representation matters, but it is not the same as community power.

## Working both inside and outside formal structures

The Arcade Group Dewsbury offers one of the clearest examples of a community business using multiple governance routes at once. Formally, it is a membership-led Community Benefit Society with more than 200 members and a board that is actively trying to broaden representation across the town. Drawing on its Community Benefit Society (CBS) model the group also raised community shares, giving local people a direct stake in the future of the Arcade.

The Arcade itself is council owned, with The Arcade Group agreeing a ten year lease to curate and manage the Arcade's retail units and community space.

At the same time, The Arcade Group is operating within wider town governance. Its chair sits on the Neighbourhood Board, and another board member leads a working group linked to local regeneration funding. But The Arcade Group has not relied on formal representation alone. It has also launched a Business Network to bring together town centre stakeholders around a more attractive and active centre, creating another channel through which local ideas and priorities can be organised.

This matters because it shows both the value and the limits of formal neighbourhood governance on its own. The Neighbourhood Board has provided an important route for community voices to be present in local decision making, and the group has been able to secure some support through it. At the same time, The Arcade Group's experience suggests that representation alone is not always enough to translate local energy into timely action, with meetings and decisions often long delayed. Their response has been pragmatic: stay engaged in formal structures, while also building wider networks and momentum beyond them.

**What this shows:** community businesses often need to combine formal representation with independent organising if they are to turn local energy into sustained influence.



The risk is that Neighbourhood Boards become vehicles for validating existing priorities rather than opening up new choices about what renewal should look like or who benefits from it.

This matters now particularly because the English Devolution and Community Empowerment Act creates provisions for a consistent layer of neighbourhood governance in England. While the legislation enables flexibility to local contexts, there is clear appetite for these arrangements to give communities real decision-making power and for neighbourhood governance to be complementary, but not replicate, the powers of elected decision makers and council officers. Polling by We're Right Here showed that while one in ten people feel these arrangements should be led by councillors alone, four times as many felt leadership should be shared by communities, councils and other partners.<sup>20</sup>

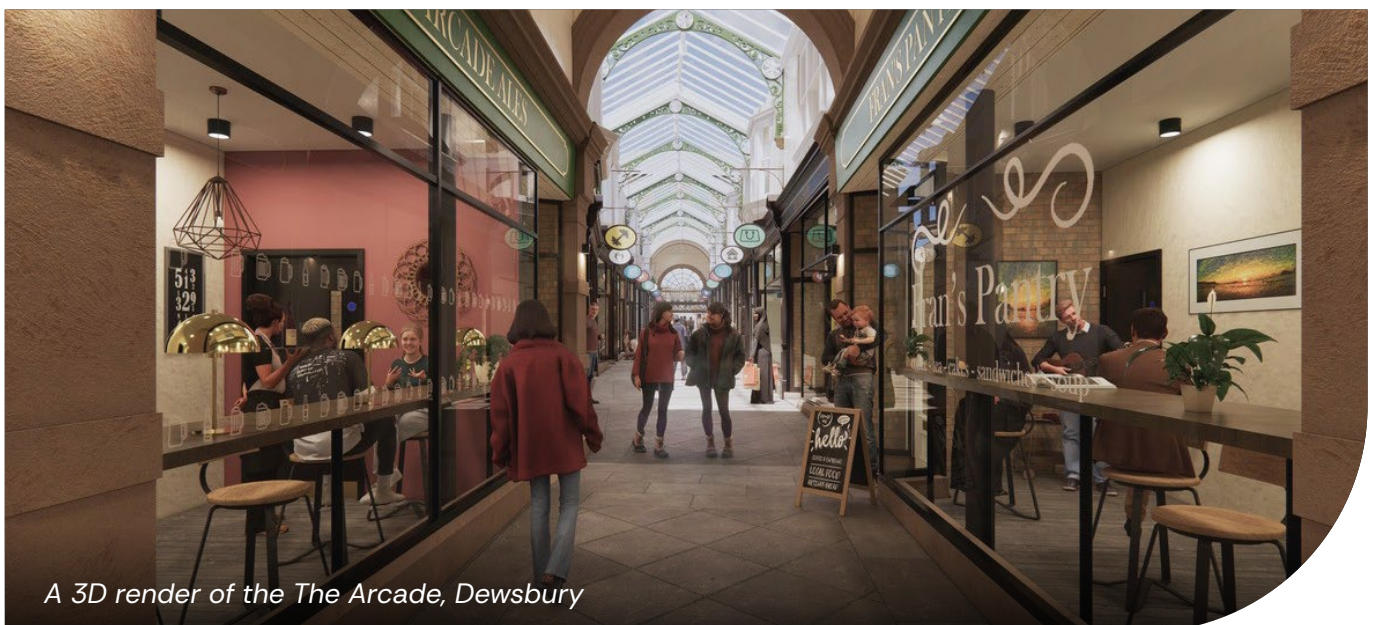
Within the context of Pride in Place, the government has set an expectation that Neighbourhood Boards should evolve over the first three years of the programme into genuinely community-led delivery models (such as evolving the board into a Community Interest Company (CIC) or CBS, or transferring delivery responsibility to an existing anchor organisation). Without early community participation, it will be challenging to build the trust and capacity needed to transition to community-led delivery, with a clear local mandate and transparent decision making.

The balance of the Pride in Place funds, at 75% capital and 25% revenue split, for phase one areas, adjusted to 63% capital and 37% revenue split for phase two areas, also requires careful prioritisation of the revenue capacity to animate town-centre life, alongside funding capital schemes. We expand further on the funding and finance structures that can help civic driven efforts to revitalise the high street below.

While in Dewsbury, The Arcade Group has secured representation on the Neighbourhood Board, in Birkenhead the Chief Executive of Make CIC has recently been confirmed as the independent chair of the Birkenhead Central Neighbourhood Board.

Make CIC's example shows that where community-led governance structures exist, and their value is recognised, community power can be enabled from the beginning of government funding programmes

The cohort shows that community businesses are not waiting passively for improved formal governance. They are creating or reshaping their own forums – such as The Arcade Group's business network in Dewsbury, the Leftbank Collective in Birkenhead, MadLab's cross-sector work on creative infrastructure in Stockport, and Southmead's long-term community planning. In doing so, they play an important role in developing informal governance structures that better represent community voice, and, where opportunity arises, are connecting these forums into formal governance structures to strengthen community influence in high street regeneration.



*A 3D render of the The Arcade, Dewsbury*

## Creating a collective voice for the town centre

In Birkenhead, Make CIC and partner organisations have created the Leftbank Collective, an alliance of community-focused organisations working to shape the future of the Argyle Independent Quarter. Rather than acting separately, the alliance gives the area's creative and social organisations a shared identity, a clearer public voice and stronger legitimacy in conversations with the council and other stakeholders.

The Collective has co-managed a small funding pot for shopfront renewal with the local council, launched a prospectus for the area, created branding, built a communication channel for business support and started to influence wider strategic conversations, including around Birkenhead's cultural strategy. It also allows different organisations to play to their strengths while contributing to a broader place-based agenda.

With Birkenhead Central announced as a phase two Pride in Place area in September 2025, their existing work has created the opportunity for the Collective to step into the formal governance of Pride in Place, with Make CIC's Chief Executive being appointed as the independent chair of the Birkenhead Central Neighbourhood Board.

This is a useful governance story because it shows that community power is not only about being given a seat on an official board. It can also be built through coalitions that create shared agency, align local actors and make it harder for regeneration conversations to bypass the organisations already doing the work on the ground. Where opportunity arises, coalition-building can also develop into opportunity for community power to be embedded in formal governance structures.

**What this shows:** coalition-building can be a governance intervention in its own right, helping fragmented local actors speak with more coherence and influence.



Make CIC, Birkenhead

What these examples share is not a single model but a common function. Community businesses are acting as convenors, translators and long-term stewards of local ambition. They can connect residents, small businesses, civic institutions and funders in ways that formal regeneration structures often struggle to do. Southmead's experience is especially important here: it shows that community-led governance can hold a place-based mandate together through repeated redesign, funding negotiation and delivery delay.

Community businesses are not only asking for a greater role in regeneration; they are already creating many of the governance conditions that make better regeneration possible. They build local mandate, sustain relationships over time, convene missing voices and create forums through which communities can shape change. But too often this work sits at the edge of formal decision-making rather than inside it, meaning communities help generate momentum without being able to shape investment and implementation at scale. This suggests a wider reframing for policy: neighbourhood governance should not be treated simply as a route for participation, but as part of the enabling infrastructure for long-term community stewardship.

That in turn suggests that the route from temporary use to long-term stewardship cannot be understood only through leases or ownership. It also depends on whether local governance gives community organisations a durable role in shaping the future of place.

Across the cohort, community organisations were most able to secure and shape space where they were treated as legitimate actors in local decision-making rather than as temporary occupiers or consultees. This points to a wider principle for high street policy: access to space is mediated by neighbourhood governance. The question is not only whether communities can enter a building, but whether they have a recognised role in shaping the local priorities, investment decisions and partnership arrangements that determine how space is used over time. In that sense, neighbourhood governance should be understood as part of the enabling infrastructure of community-led regeneration, alongside data, powers and finance. Where community businesses are embedded as long-term institutional partners in local regeneration, the pathway from activation to stewardship becomes more realistic. Where they are only invited in episodically, community use remains fragile, contingent and easier to displace.



*Southmead Development Trust, Bristol*



Innovator profile

# Artspace Lifespace

Artspace Lifespace was established in 2006 and specialises in transforming vacant and underused buildings into thriving creative and community spaces.

Based in Bristol, the organisation has over 20 years' experience working with meanwhile space, repurposing neglected properties in ways that respond to local cultural context while supporting artists, independent businesses and communities. Their work is grounded in the belief that vacant buildings damage neighbourhood morale, safety and economic vitality, and that creative, community-led reuse can offer a viable and socially beneficial alternative.



The focus of Artspace Lifespace's high street innovation work is Broadmead, a key shopping district in Bristol. The area faces issues of vacancy, declining footfall and significant anti-social behaviour. In 2023, Artspace Lifespace opened Sparks Bristol, a large-scale meanwhile use project in a former department store, developed in partnership with the Global Goals Centre. Operated under short, rolling leases, Sparks demonstrates both the potential and fragility of community-led meanwhile use, with insecure tenure creating ongoing challenges to financial stability, long-term planning and organisational resilience.

Artspace Lifespace's use of city centre space responds to the community's need and to the financial precarity across Bristol's creative community. Surveys of local artists, studio holders and traders highlights that 62.5% earn below £20,000 per year across all income sources, rising to 75% of the traders represented at Sparks – well below the UK national minimum wage of £24,800. With a scarcity of affordable space for creative and community use in Bristol, Artspace Lifespace are exploring how to embed long-term community ownership into Broadmead as the area is regenerated.

Artspace Lifespace plays a central role in the Bristol Vacant Property Taskforce (VPT), established in 2023 to bring together local government, property owners, agents, cultural organisations and universities. The Taskforce aims to better understand the barriers to reusing vacant property, reduce long-term vacancy across the city centre and explore how more civic, inclusive identities for high streets could develop. Partners include Bristol City Council, Savills, Broadmead BID, Cabot Circus, The Galleries, the University of the West of England and Womble Bond Dickinson.

Their involvement in the VPT is a core element of their Community-Led High Street Innovation, along with the development of a high street property database, gathering and making accessible data about high street assets. They are also developing a Vacant Property Toolkit – a publicly available resource, offering practical guidance to community organisations and independent businesses seeking to access and activate vacant space, particularly through meanwhile use. Through both the toolkit and the Taskforce, Artspace Lifespace seeks to influence practice and policy, by addressing entrenched issues such as soft-stripping, distant ownership and prolonged vacancy, and supporting more sustainable, community-led approaches to high street regeneration at a time of reduced public sector capacity and cultural funding.

Their model incorporates the provision of creative workspace, events and the incubation of entrepreneurial start-up traders.

Artspace Lifespace's

**22**

members of staff are complemented by nearly

**200**

volunteers, predominantly at Sparks Bristol, who contributed over

**2,890**

hours of activity in 2023–24, with an estimated pro-bono value of

**£38,900**

to the Broadmead community.

## Funding and finance



*CLHSI study visit to Dewsbury*

The financial challenge facing community-led high street renewal is not simply that there is too little money. The experience of the Innovators shows that the funding available is fragmented, short term and often poorly matched to the work community-led regeneration actually involves. Often this funding is tied to visible outputs.<sup>21</sup> It can also present an unhelpful separation of the revenue funds required to support the slow work of organising and being accountable to the community, and the capital required to develop community-led spaces.

Additionally, where public investment exists it can be mismatched with the capacity of councils to access and make use of funds and too often public funds improve private assets and do not retain value locally.

To work effectively to renew the high street, community businesses need a consistent pathway that links revenue, pre-development support, capital and patient finance.

At present, there is no clear national finance pathway that takes community organisations from early activation to long-term stewardship. Large-scale programmes that previously provided some support, including the Community Ownership Fund and UK Shared Prosperity Fund, are ending or have ended, and there is no equivalent long-term vehicle designed specifically around community-led regeneration of high streets and town centres.<sup>22</sup> New funding announcements may reopen the policy space, but the experience of the cohort suggests that funding design will matter as much as funding volume. One-off or short-lived programmes can help communities start things but rarely give them enough runway to stabilise them.

This matters because community-led renewal is rarely a single project. It often involves years of relationship-building, asset negotiations, feasibility work, legal advice, consultation, business planning and convening across sectors, alongside the capital costs of taking on space. These are all essential parts of making a high street scheme viable, but they are also the kinds of work least well served by competitive, output-driven or time-limited funding. The result is that community businesses spend significant energy stitching together partial sources of support, while the work of building long-term stewardship remains thinly resourced.

## Community businesses can assemble complex finance – but the system still makes long-term stewardship too fragile

In Dewsbury, The Arcade Group's work with Kirklees Council to bring the town's Victorian shopping arcade back into use has required a complex and fragmented patchwork of funding.

Kirklees Council bought the freehold of the building from a private owner who had let the building fall into disrepair, and a National Lottery Heritage Fund grant of £4.5 million was secured for the capital costs of renovating the Arcade. Alongside this funding The Arcade Group raised community shares to the value of £195,000 to fund their start-up costs, bringing necessary revenue funding alongside the capital grant.

As the renovation of the Arcade has been delayed by the complexity of the work, and The Arcade Group have understood the need to expand their role to engage with the regeneration of the wider town centre, they have brought in additional funding. Sustaining a single team member has required securing funds from the Architectural Heritage Fund, UK Shared Prosperity Funding (UKSPF), the Reach Fund and, going forward, partial funding from the National Lottery Community Fund. The organisation's second post, of Arcade Manager, has relied on UKSPF to date, and will be partially funded two days per week from the Arcade's Service Charge income once the Arcade opens. Additional support from Coops UK, a grant to install solar panels from nBS Foundation, financial support from the Neighbourhood Board, and Power to Change's funding as part of this demonstrator have also been secured.

The Dewsbury example shows the ability of community business to attract and manage a wide range of capital and revenue support to bring a major heritage asset back into use and expand its role in town-centre renewal. That is a strength. But it also shows how difficult it is to build long-term stewardship on the basis of multiple short-term and tightly restricted pots of funding.

**What this shows:** the issue is not that community businesses cannot manage complexity; it is that too much of their capacity is consumed by navigating fragmented finance when a more coherent funding pathway would allow them to focus on delivery, partnership-building and long-term local impact.



*CLHSI study visit to Stockport*

Local government pressure intensifies this problem. Councils are often important partners in community-led regeneration, whether through brokerage, asset strategy, legal support, access to property data, planning, or programme delivery. But where councils are managing stretched capacity, staff churn and competing demands, they often cannot consistently play this enabling role. With many councils in challenging financial positions, the potential for them to deliver financial support in the form of community asset transfers, below-market sales and reductions in business rates is also weakened, and their legal and financial risk appetite to use powers like Compulsory Purchase Orders is also likely to be diminished. Communities are then left navigating both a difficult external funding landscape and a weakened local institutional one.

This difficult interplay between the funding landscape and the capacity of local government can be seen in the operation of some central government support. In Birkenhead, funding attached to HSRAs was theoretically available to support implementation, but the conditions of that support did not align with local authority realities. Funding conditions required procurement of external support, even where internal expertise already existed, and short timescales clashed with the capacity of a stretched local authority. This left a willing community organisation and a potentially useful public power stuck in the gap between national design and local capacity. More broadly, councils are often balancing multiple objectives at once: encouraging investment, managing relationships with landlords and developers, reducing legal and financial risk, and responding to local need. In that context, potentially useful powers can be difficult to bring into practice. The lesson is not only that councils need more resource, but that funding and powers need to be designed around how local systems function in practice, including the incentives and constraints within which councils operate.

The issue of the availability of funding and the design of this funding intensifies with the scale of a project. Southmead Development Trust's experience in stewarding a community-led regeneration of their high street and neighbourhood illustrates the difficulty of community businesses delivering ambitious mixed-use schemes with funding requirements in the tens of millions in a system that is designed for larger players.

## Mixed-use schemes are still built for bigger players

Southmead Development Trust's regeneration scheme shows both the ambition and the difficulty of community-led mixed-use development. The development combines 177 new homes, new community enterprise space, the delivery of public services and improved public realm – exactly the kind of integrated model often called for in debates about the future of high streets.

But delivering it has meant navigating a system designed around larger and more specialist actors. The latest Homes England funding programmes do not prioritise place-making or community involvement, and the design of the scheme and the housing it will create has been subject to changing appetites within Registered Housing Providers (RHPs), with less appetite for schemes focusing on flats, which matches this community's needs.

Developing a partnership with an RHP is essential to the viability of this development, as it enables access to national subsidy for building homes for social rent. While some community organisations have registered themselves as an RHP in order to access social housing funding from Homes England themselves, the process is complex and risky, with significant financial implications, including the need to find repayable finance to match large-scale public subsidy. It also requires a community organisation to take on a long-term role as a housing provider, which may not meet the organisation's skills or ambitions.

Additionally, as a community business takes on the role of bringing forward a development this work can sit uneasily with their existing role and expertise: development risk sits uneasily with a charity's finances and capabilities, and VAT rules can penalise community use of ground-floor space while making straightforward commercial letting easier. Over time, these constraints can dilute community ambition, reduce autonomy and reshape schemes around the priorities of larger institutional partners.

**What this shows:** developments best suited to community needs on the high street are disproportionately difficult to deliver, because the system is not well aligned with community priorities and places demands that many community businesses cannot meet.



An additional complexity in the funding picture is that when public funding is made available for high street regeneration, it can leak out of the high street, failing to secure long-term local or community benefit.

## When public money leaks out of the high street

Make CIC's experience in Birkenhead shows how public investment can fail to retain value locally. Through a small shopfront improvement programme, public money helped improve the appearance of units and generated local excitement about new activity on the high street. But in some cases, those improvements also became a justification for rent increases, meaning the uplift created through public funding was captured by private landlords rather than locked into long-term community benefit.

This is the wrong kind of funding logic. It improves the appearance of place without changing who holds power, security or value. By contrast, the fit-out grants Make CIC learned about through HSRA early adopters suggest a more appropriate and durable model: support that enables vacant units to be repurposed, and makes them more attractive for start-up and independent businesses that do not have corporate budgets, leaving units in a reusable condition for future occupants and building shared value into the asset itself.

**What this shows:** funding design is as important as funding volume - it should not only improve places in the short term, but also secure long-term community benefit.

The demonstrator also suggests that funding design can work against the very outcomes public investment is intended to support. While recognising the trade-offs that come with every form of regeneration funding directed by councils, some interventions improve the appearance of a place or reduce risk for landlords, but do little to build long-term community control or retain value locally. In those cases, public money can end up enhancing private asset values, while community organisations remain in insecure tenancies or continue to shoulder the cost of making buildings usable.

A stronger principle for future investment is value retention: public funding should leave assets, places and local institutions in a stronger position for long-term civic use, rather than subsidising short-term occupation or private uplift alone. At present there is a far higher tolerance for risk and wealth loss when investing in the private sector compared to investments in communities; however, there is huge potential to retain greater value in place by re-balancing this approach.



Futureyard, Birkenhead

Taken together, these lessons point to a deeper issue than a simple shortage of funds. Community businesses are showing that there is demand, energy and practical capability to reimagine high streets as mixed-use civic spaces. What is missing is a finance system that supports the pathway from temporary activation to long-term stewardship, and encourages stakeholders leading wider investment programmes to create long-term community stewardship opportunities as part of their work. Without this, the burden falls on community organisations to patch together opportunity from fragmented programmes, weak local capacity and funding streams that were not designed for the work they are trying to do.

Community-led regeneration rarely succeeds through capital alone. Different stages require different kinds of support:

- Revenue funding for organising, partnership-building, staff time and local coordination
- Pre-development support for surveys, legal work, feasibility, business cases, repairs and negotiations
- Capital funding for acquisition, refurbishment or redevelopment
- Patient finance to support long-term stewardship, rather than short project cycles.

The current system offers fragments of this picture, but rarely a coherent route through it. The result is that community organisations can often test ideas, but struggle to move from activation to permanence.



*CLHSI study visit to Dewsbury*



Innovator profile

# The Arcade Group

The Arcade Group is a community business determined to revive Dewsbury town centre, West Yorkshire, through innovative, community-led action.

Initially established as a steering group in 2020 and formalised as a CBS in 2022, The Arcade Group aim to transform both a heritage asset and the wider high street in a town facing deep structural challenges. Dewsbury is a highly diverse town, with a rich mix of communities and cultural backgrounds, that has experienced significant commercial decline, falling footfall and social challenges in recent decades.

At the heart of their work is the restoration and management of Dewsbury Arcade, a Grade II-listed Victorian shopping arcade built in 1899 that closed in 2016 after years of declining visitors and tenants. With Kirklees Council purchasing the arcade in 2020 and securing a £4.5 million National Lottery Heritage Fund grant for refurbishment, The Arcade Group is preparing to operate the building as the UK's first community-run shopping centre, blending retail, culture, workspace and events to reinvigorate town centre life.



### The Arcade Group's work extends beyond the building.

In the past 12 months alone, they have run

**19 community events that engaged over 22,000 local people.**

They have launched a town centre Business Network with over

**200 members,**

and a "Win a Shop" competition that has promoted community engagement and encouraged local entrepreneurs to take up tenancy opportunities.

In that time, they have partnered with over

**50 local organisations,**

delivering over

**3,000 hours of volunteering.**

Five of the 16 internal units being refurbished are already committed, with further interest, while the group collaborates with arts and education organisations, market management, landlords, councillors and community groups to embed regeneration in the everyday life experience of the people of Dewsbury.

The wider context includes government funding programmes to invest in the town, with the previous government's Long Term Plan for Towns evolving into Plan for Neighbourhoods under the current government, and most recently into Pride in Place.

Despite delays to the opening, now expected in June 2026, and the challenges of leading change in a politically complex, highly diverse town with historical negativity around civic pride, The Arcade Group remains focused on a three-year plan to extend its influence beyond the Arcade into broader high street renewal, occupancy growth, community services and place-making that reflects local aspirations.

# Recommendations for central government

Our learning supports the understanding that high street regeneration emerges in locally specific ways, and is dependent on the unique needs of places and communities, their existing assets and the nature of their local challenges. Still, there is a clear role for central government in catalysing the transition from a retail-led model to the mixed-use civic high street. With the publication of a new High Street Strategy and allocation of over £300m of funding for high street innovation expected later this year, there is an ideal opportunity for government to induce a civic high street revival.

These policy recommendations are designed to cement that civic vision, overcome local barriers to achieving it, and to enable greater community ownership and control of high street assets to ensure the long-term stewardship and sustainability of the civic high street in community hands.



## Create a civic high street vision

# 1

### Make a civic high street model the explicit vision of the High Street Strategy

Government should explicitly embed the civic high street model, not just a retail-led recovery model, as the core organising principle for the forthcoming High Street Strategy.

The High Street Strategy should explicitly recognise high streets and town centres as essential social infrastructure and support high streets to deliver public services, education, culture and heritage, housing and community enterprise – not just retail. Any funding and policy measures set out in the strategy should be oriented towards achieving this civic high street vision, and funding allocated to support High Street Innovation Partnerships should also advance this model.

Government must recognise the role of community ownership and community business as central delivery vehicles for this civic vision. Any future high street funding and new policy tools (as well as support to implement existing powers) should align with facilitating these groups' leadership of high street regeneration. Existing interventions, such as the Pride in Place programme and local growth funding by regional authorities, should be geared towards supporting the realisation of this vision and enabling community leadership and ownership of the high street.

## Tackle barriers to local regeneration

# 2

### Reform access to and collection of high street ownership and vacancy data

Government and councils should improve and open access to information on high street vacancy and asset ownership, standardise datasets where possible, and ensure communities can access the data needed to target interventions and make the case for civic reuse.

Currently, data about who owns the high street remains fragmented and much of it is stuck behind a paywall. In many places, councils, communities and other regeneration developers lack a coherent overview of which spaces are stuck in long-term vacancy, or why.

Building on the decision to reform Land Registry data access, government should explore opportunities to create a combined open access dataset that brings together existing centrally and locally collected data about land and property ownership, vacancy and value, and expand data collection to support local regeneration.<sup>23</sup> This could combine existing data such as that held in the Land Registry, Register of Overseas Interests, local business rate valuations and national vacancy data. To assist in monitoring the success of civic high street transformation over time, data on footfall, ownership composition (private, public and community) and local wealth retention could be added in time.

As part of the High Street Strategy, government should implement a high street data collection drive which requires councils to map and designate their local high streets, create a live vacancy register and strengthen local property ownership data. This work could be supported through funding community businesses to do targeted high street data collection – including running community engagement to map and designate high streets in their area, and identifying priority vacant properties for civic transformation, based on local need.

# 3

## Roll out high street ‘innovation squads’ to help councils utilise their powers to shape the high street with local communities

**The High Street Strategy should facilitate support to councils to use their existing powers to support community-led efforts to induce high street regeneration, and overcome challenges of capacity, knowledge and risk aversion.**

The government has already implemented a raft of local authority powers and is shaping new ones, such as licensing to restrict vape shops and betting shops on high streets, as well as introducing the Community Right to Buy. However, many local authorities struggle with a lack of expert knowledge, capacity, and legal and financial risk aversion, and do not fully utilise the powers at their disposal to unlock vacant space on high streets for civic reuse. Furthermore, even when making use of these powers, councils may perceive using them to support community-led regeneration to carry additional risk or complication.

Government should provide implementation support, peer learning and targeted technical help to councils to use existing statutory powers to support community-led high street regeneration and facilitate a civic high street renewal. To do this, they should direct powers such as HSRAs, Compulsory Purchase Orders and Section 215 powers and funding streams such as Community Infrastructure Levy, towards supporting access to assets and funding for community-led regeneration projects. This guidance and support should also help councils gear up to support the implementation of new community rights, including the Community Right to Buy and expanded definition of Assets of Community Value.

Building on the experience of the Cabinet Office’s Public Service Reform Test, Learn and Grow scheme, the government should implement an intensive support programme to enable local authorities to put their existing high street powers into practice. This will allow them to work with their communities to improve the state of the high street and facilitate a longer-term behavioural shift in how local authorities deliver high street renewal. These innovation teams would draw on expertise from central government (including MHCLG and Treasury) as well as from innovative local authorities, practitioners and community leaders that are shaping creative reuse of high street spaces. This short-term intervention would not permanently add additional capacity to local authorities but would help to trigger a behavioural shift towards more proactive use of these policies to free up high street assets for use by local communities and civic regenerators.

This intervention should also be supported by new or updated guidance for local authorities and local partners on using the existing policy toolkit and the gathering of best practice case studies which could be made available in all places to help local authorities fill knowledge gaps and build confidence to utilise existing policy. This should also support readiness to implement the Community Right to Buy.

## Establish a community-led regeneration pathway

# 4

### Design policies, support and funding to assist communities to progress from temporary use to long-term asset stewardship

National and local policy, support and funding should be designed to make it easier for community organisations to move from pop-up or meanwhile use to longer-term lease arrangements and ownership, enabling them to become long-term stewards of high street renewal.

As this report has established, pop-up or meanwhile use works best as a means to soft-test the offer of community business and enable progress towards long-term occupation and stewardship of the high street. Government should require publicly funded high street regeneration programmes, funds and policy interventions to support community organisations to progress towards long-term use and permanence.

The forthcoming High Street Strategy and associated funding should require local authorities and delivery partnerships to identify suitable assets for community-led use. They should also: define the tenure options available at each stage; ensure that capital, revenue funding and support to progress projects are aligned to these different tenures and needs at different stages of the asset journey; and make sure that the powers will be used to help communities secure longer-term control where appropriate. This would shift policy away from treating community use as a temporary vacancy fix and towards building durable local stewardship of high street assets.

Community businesses should be viewed as key stakeholders and delivery partners for the government's £301m High Street Innovation Partnerships and the funding should support their progress towards long-term use of high street assets. Where councils are approaching partnerships with the private sector to improve high streets, this funding and local government's convening role should be used to incentivise high street partners to create meaningful and affordable access to space for communities too.

# 5

### Establish a fair model meanwhile lease agreement and support for landlords and tenants

Government should develop a new model lease for meanwhile use and clear guidance for communities, landlords and councils as part of the High Street Strategy to help transform meanwhile space from pop-up activity to incubators for community enterprises.

A model meanwhile lease is intended to provide a template and guidance to be used by landlords seeking to proactively provide access to space for communities in their surplus buildings. The current model meanwhile use lease and guidance supplied by MHCLG to help more landlords implement meanwhile use of their properties was introduced by the Department for Communities and Local Government in 2009 as part of the Meanwhile Project.<sup>24</sup> A new model lease is needed and should be updated to reflect the changing realities and aspirations for the high street, as well as the growing

recognition of the role that communities play as developers and stewards. It should set fair parameters for short-term use of high street property by community businesses and community organisations, and recognise their role in creating value uplift, increasing footfall and stewarding assets (reducing guardianship or insurance costs to the asset owner) and accordingly ensuring affordable and secure access to space for communities in return.

### **This model meanwhile lease should:**

- Establish a 'meanwhile condition' as standard for property at the beginning and end of a lease (rather than a full strip out) to prevent excessive fit out costs and reduce waste.
- Provide appropriate notification periods for lease termination and clear, mutually beneficial break clauses to help landlords and tenants plan for the future.
- Place restrictions on the duration of short-term, rolling leases by introducing new tenant rights after a period of initial occupation and asset stewardship, providing much-needed stability so communities can plan for the future.

Government should also explore preferential rights for community-led occupiers to secure assets they use on a meanwhile basis if the landlord decides to sell – like a right of first refusal to negotiate a sale with the landlord, or a priority right to asset transfer for publicly owned assets if a local authority chooses to divest of them.

# 6

## **Establish a Property Holding Vehicle to finance the community-led buyout of vacant and underutilised high street property**

**Government should initiate and help to capitalise a Property Holding Vehicle that can enable the flexible purchase and transfer of assets into community ownership, for the purpose of civic high street regeneration. This would overcome challenges of accessing money at the pace and scale needed to purchase high street property, and further support communities to progress along the regeneration pathway towards long-term ownership.**

This Property Holding Company would bring together ideas like Power to Change's long-standing call for a **High Street Buyout Fund**, emerging work on asset mutualisation and the Liverpool City Region Asset Holding Company initiated by Kindred. It would provide national scale and investment opportunities for trusts and foundations supporting the emergence of the civic high street, as well as property developers and the wider impact investing sector.<sup>25</sup>

The vehicle could be part-capitalised through the recently announced £301m funding for high street innovation, with the Office for the Impact Economy playing a key role to attract philanthropic and social investment and support from the property development industry to create a renewable, blended fund at scale. Community-led high street innovators seeking community ownership opportunities could be engaged in a small-scale proof of concept for this approach.

The government should commit to building this model as part of the High Street Strategy and give MHCLG and the Office for the Impact Economy a mandate to work with those leading high street innovation to shape its design, governance and build a pipeline of investment opportunities.



Innovator profile

# Southmead Development Trust

Southmead Development Trust is a long-established, resident-led community anchor organisation working in Southmead, Bristol.

Founded in the early 1990s and based in a former secondary school now held on a long lease, the Trust delivers a wide range of services including health and wellbeing provision, youth work, enterprise support and community facilities. With a turnover of around £2m and a staff team of approximately 60, it combines trading activity with grant-funded work to sustain long-term community benefit.



The Trust's current focus is the regeneration of Arnside, a small suburban high street and adjoining green space at Glencoyne Square. Once intended as the heart of the estate, Arnside has become run-down and is affected by low footfall, vacancy and anti-social behaviour. The square itself is underutilised, lacking active frontages, seating or amenities, and is not overlooked by surrounding buildings. Despite this, Arnside serves a community with a strong sense of identity and high ethnic diversity, alongside deep-rooted inequalities and complex local relationships.

Over the past eight years, the Trust has undertaken extensive outreach, business engagement and community visioning, leading to a community-led masterplan. At its centre is the innovative Glencoyne Square development: a community-owned extension to the high street, known as Upper Arnside, with new homes above retail and mixed-use units.

With full planning approval, the scheme will deliver approximately 177 homes alongside a new library, gym, community enterprise units and improved public realm, designed to increase footfall, improve safety and support long-term viability for the area. The development will begin on-site in 2026.

Southmead Development Trust's work highlights the rewards, opportunities and challenges in a community business taking on a large-scale development. Bringing a clear community mandate for change, and able to work over the decade-long timeframe that has been required to date, the Trust have brought forward a development that simply would not have happened without community leadership.

In 2024/25 the Trust generated over

**£35.9m**

of social value across the Southmead area.

That year their programme of activities delivered

**89**

community events, with over

**182,000**

visits being made to their centres.

Their remit is inclusive of all sections of the Southmead community. For example, over

**£6.8m**

of social impact was delivered through 'The Ranch', a centre focused on children and young people's mental health and wellbeing activities.

Separately, over

**£1m**

of social impact was delivered in support of vulnerable adults in the area.

# Reimagining the high street – future opportunities

The CLHSI demonstrator also points towards a wider set of questions that merit further research, testing and partnership-building if community-led high street regeneration is to move from a promising practice to a more established model of local renewal.

## Themes for further exploration

### High streets as places of cohesion and civic trust:

The demonstrator suggests that high streets can do more than support economic activity: they can help rebuild social cohesion and civic trust. In places like Dewsbury and Stockport, community-led activity on the high street creates opportunities to bring people together across lines of difference, counter local cynicism and build a stronger shared identity and stake in the future of the place. This points to a wider question: how far can community-led high street regeneration support the government's policy agenda on social cohesion, by creating spaces, relationships and forms of local leadership that build trust, connection and confidence in divided or low-trust places?

### High streets as neighbourhood prevention infrastructure:

The civic high street model also raises bigger questions about the role of high streets in prevention and public service reform. If high streets are understood as everyday social infrastructure, they could become places where the NHS establishes neighbourhood health centres, as set out in their 10-year plan, Fit For the Future.<sup>26</sup> Alongside the delivery of primary healthcare, high streets have the potential to be places where care, learning, skills and social support are delivered closer to home, in ways that are more visible, accessible and rooted in community life. Southmead's vision of combining homes, community space and potentially services such as health provision points towards a future in which high streets are part of the neighbourhood prevention agenda, rather than being treated separately from it. This is an important area for further exploration, particularly in relation to the role of community business in neighbourhood health, healthy ageing, access to work and local wellbeing.

### High streets as sites of long-term community stewardship:

A final area for future development is the question of long-term stewardship. Across the report, community organisations show that they can animate space, convene partners and generate local momentum, but that it remains much harder to secure lasting influence over assets, investment and decision making. This suggests a need for further work on what enables communities to move from activation to durable stewardship: what kinds of governance, finance, technical support and partnership models are needed, and how policy can better support that journey. Developing this agenda would help move community-led regeneration from a promising set of local examples towards a more established model of long-term high street renewal.

## Realising the civic high street

The CLHSI demonstrator forms part of a broad landscape of projects and practice seeking to make high streets vibrant, mixed-use spaces that provide access to public services, space for community and connection, and even housing, alongside the existing retail and hospitality mix. We know there is significant support for this civic model for the high street – now, with the opportunity of the government’s High Street Strategy, this vision needs greater coherence, clarity, and operationalising.

Power to Change is partnering with This Day to create a Civic High Streets Collective, which will convene a network of cross-sectoral civic regeneration practitioners, commercial developers and policy experts to provide infrastructure and support to ensure government’s plans for high streets are realistic, deliverable and transformative for communities.

The Collective aims to shift the civic high streets model from the margins to the mainstream across policy and practice. In short, this would mean a transformation of town centres across the country, and a positive shift in the way the public feels about the state of the high street.



# Conclusions

We are at a critical juncture for the British high street. The forthcoming High Street Strategy, and the £301 million funding allocated alongside it, present an opportunity for government to turn the direction of high street policy away from an outdated, retail-led model that props up the status-quo, and towards a more vibrant, mixed-use future that meets the challenges of today, and can sustain our communities tomorrow.

The clearest lesson from the CLHSI demonstrator is that community-led regeneration is not a niche add-on to mainstream high streets policy. It is a practical route to renewing places in ways that are more locally grounded, more trusted and more capable of sustaining activity over time.

The five projects in this demonstrator exemplify the potential of the civic high street: creating space for connection, shared identity and trust; providing animating services and activities that restore footfall; creating affordable homes for families where they are needed; and shifting the high street economy to keep wealth and ownership in the hands of local people. Their innovation and entrepreneurialism must continue to be championed and resourced.

But the demonstrator also shows the limits of relying on local ingenuity alone. Communities can animate space, build coalitions and steward assets; they cannot fix broken property data, weak tenure, thin council capacity or fragmented funding by themselves. The next phase of high streets policy, funding and support should therefore focus less on one-off activation and more on building the conditions for long-term civic renewal.

The government's task now is to ensure that its forthcoming High Street Strategy aligns national policy with the civic high streets model, matching this emerging vision with the tools, powers, partnerships and investment to make it a reality.



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